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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of simple sentence-combining exercises as a way to show students the unlimited capacity of their own language. Using sets consisting of eight, six, four, and three sentences, no two students of the 27 in a freshman composition class produced identical rewrites of any one set. Such exercises are useful for instilling a measure of linguistic self-respect early in the course. (AA)

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Increasing Linguistic Self-Respect through Sentence Combining

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Many freshman composition students suffer from an almost paralyzing lack of confidence in their ability to express themselves effectively. In a paper I read at the 1976 CCCC (Chappel, 1976), I argued that to a great extent this lack of confidence stemmed from a lack of respect on their part for just how incredibly vast their knowledge of language is. And I reported on a set of exercises I give my students to try to develop in them a greater appreciation for the enormity of accomplishment language acquisition represents. The exercises consist of 20 sentences involving highly complex conference rules, such as:

1. Because John lost the race, he cried all the way home.
2. Upset because John lost the race, he cried all the way home.

The task is for students to correctly interpret the pronoun reference in each sentence and they do so with nearly 100% accuracy, a result which forces them to admit that they have total mastery of a system so complex it defies the best efforts of grammarians to explain it with anything like completeness. Moreover, they are forced to admit that this mastery on their part has nothing to do with their respective educational, social, or geographic backgrounds.

But there is another aspect of language which makes this uniform competence even more impressive and which again beginning writers are largely unaware of, or at least unconvinced of. I am referring to what Charles Hockett (1963) calls open-endedness, or what Noam Chomsky refers to as the "creative

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aspect" of all language (1965; 1968). By this Chomsky means that the set of immensely complex rules which comprise human linguistic competence have the power to generate a potentially infinite number of sentences. In fact, this creativity is the cornerstone of the whole transformational-generative movement in linguistics. If the total inventory of sentences in a language can never be exhausted, then it follows that a grammar of a language which accounts for only those sentences actually produced and recorded will be inadequate. The grammar, in the view of the transformationalists, should also account for those sentences which have not yet been produced, but might be the very next utterance of any speaker. In other words, the grammar should explicitly state the set of rules which the native speaker has internalized, i.e. learned unconsciously (Chomsky, 1965), and which he naturally and fluently uses to create sentences.

Notice here that the reference is to the native speaker, not to the skillful speaker or the gifted writer. Creativity, in this view, is a feature of the language ability of not only the so-called creative writers, but of all who have acquired a native language. Just as the internalized knowledge of linguistic rules seems independent of educational and social factors, so can we expect the ability to use the rules with unlimited productivity to be similarly independent.

Students rarely, however, have any notion of this. They don't realize that, even before they have begun the upward path through composition courses to eventual writing skill, they are already, in their normal use of language, masters of an open-ended system not different in kind from that used by great writers. And this lack of awareness is, at best, unfortunate, for it can't help but improve a beginning writer's linguistic self-respect to know that in his everyday language he effortlessly uses an instrument with so much creative

power that the next sentence he utters or writes has a good chance of being brand new on the face of the planet, of never having been uttered before in the whole history of the human race.

Moreover, I suspect even those students who might have been exposed to a discussion of creativity in these terms remain for the most part unconvinced that it really applies to them. In most classrooms where it is discussed at all, the tendency is to give it lip-service since it is not possible to actually document that any given sentence has never been produced before. And thus it is also impossible to determine what percentage of the total number of sentences a speaker or writer produces in a given situation are new.

Teachers who want to stress the point usually end up suggesting sentences which have more than likely never been heard or seen before, such as "All the envelopes are on the pine trees" or "Alligators like the taste of 200 page doctoral dissertations." But these sentences are bizarre. They don't necessarily illustrate the expressive capacity of the language of normal situations. Another method, suggested by Ronald Langacker (1968), would be to suggest that students open any book at hand to any randomly selected page, put a finger down on any line of print, write down the sentence thus identified, and then try to find that sentence somewhere else. This method, even if impossible to carry out, is effective in emphasizing the infinite variety possible in language, but, since the example is taken from the work of a published professional, the students may remain unconvinced that it applies to them.

Actually, this is the problem with both these methods of illustration. While they demonstrate the potential of language, they do little to convince the student with a linguistic inferiority complex that creativity is a regular feature of his own language. The student who lacks confidence often simply assumes that his language is in a different and decidedly lower category.

Obviously, I feel it is important not to let this assumption prevail. So I have developed a series of writing exercises that I find are quite effective in driving home to composition students the unlimited expressive capacity of their own language. Each exercise is a set consisting of a sequence of nearly minimal sentences. There are four sets:

Set I. It was late last night. I was watching television. I saw a commercial. It infuriated me. It was tasteless. It was unimaginative. It used fallacious reasoning. The reasoning would have insulted a five-year-old.

Set II. The policeman walked slowly down the street. It was dark. He stopped often. He looked into the stores. They were closed for the night. He used his flashlight.

Set III. The Eiffel Tower was built in 1889. It is a famous landmark. It rises 1000 feet into the sky over Paris. It completely dominates the Paris skyline.

Set IV. Muhammad Ali won a controversial decision over Ken Norton last week. He said on Friday that he was retiring. He wants to devote full time to his religion.

I assigned these sets as writing drills in the first week of my fall composition course, two days after I had given the sentence interpretation tests referred to earlier. No discussion preceded the assignment. I made no mention at all of the creative aspect of language, or the flexibility linguistic structure offers. Likewise, I said nothing about any principles of rhetoric such as paragraph coherence. I didn't even indicate that there was necessarily anything about the sequences of sentences that needed changing. I simply handed out sheets listing the sets and asked the students to read them. I then asked if there was anyone who did not feel that the sentence sequences needed improvement. Everyone agreed that each set did need improvement.

The next step was to ask the students to rewrite and thus improve the sets in whatever way seemed natural. At no point did I refer to the assignment as a sentence-combining task, even though that is, of course, what it is. I made no suggestions as to how the students might proceed, except to say that they

should do what they felt was appropriate. But I did also request that each of the 27 students in the class produce not one, but three different versions of each set, giving a total of 81 rewrites of each set.

At the next class meeting we discussed the results. To start, I offered to bet any student in the class that every one of the 81 versions of set I would be different. The reaction was mild skepticism. I then had them at random begin reading aloud any of their combinations of set I. After about six had read, it began to dawn on them I think that I might be right. After a dozen had read they were sure.

Actually, I had for three years been using sequences of sentences such as these in set I, i.e. sets with eight or more minimal sentences, to make a point of the great potential for variety in the students' language. And using these examples I had never had a class in which two identical sentences were produced. But it occurred to me that I might obtain the same result when there were fewer than eight sentences to be combined and hence fewer possibilities for combining. So I developed sets II, III, and IV, which consist of six, four and three sentences respectively.

When we looked as a class at the results for set II, we again found not a single pair of identical responses. Naturally, most students were impressed. They seemed to grasp that even though with six sentences the number of total combinations possible would be smaller, it was nevertheless quite high. In set III, as well, there were no two students who produced exactly the same revision. By this time everyone in the class fully appreciated the marvelous power of language for varied expression.

But when we came to read the sentences of set IV, the one with three input sentences, I must admit I had my fingers crossed. There were obviously many fewer combining possibilities. I still offered to bet, however, and once again every

student produced three unique rewrites. All versions were different. And I think I can say that, in addition to a heightened awareness of the creative power of language, the effect on most students was a vastly increased respect for their own ability to use that power. Moreover, they seemed much better prepared to accept my demand that they never stop giving themselves credit for having developed such an amazing skill.

After the classroom discussion, I analyzed each set of responses in detail to verify that indeed no two were the same. There was a wide range of variation, but in every case the student reduced the number of sentences in the original by combining. In set I, 1 % of the revisions contained four sentences, 25 % had three sentences, 38 % two sentences, and 11 % one sentence. In set II, 1 % had four sentences, 10 % used three, 34 % used two, and 53 % combined the six originals into one sentence. In set III, 6 % had three sentences, 65 % two sentences, and 29 % one sentence. And in set IV, 43 % of the revisions reduced the original to two sentences, while 57 % reduced it to one sentence.

Although the range of response was impressive, there were some close calls as well, particularly the following from set IV:

1. After winning a controversial decision over Ken Norton last week, Muhammad Ali announced on Friday that he was retiring. He wants to devote full time to his religion.

2. After winning a controversial decision over Ken Norton last week, Muhammad Ali said on Friday that he was retiring. He wants to devote full time to his religion.

3. After winning a controversial decision over Ken Norton last week, Muhammad Ali said Friday he was retiring. He wants to devote full time to his religion.

4. After winning a controversial decision over Ken Norton last week, Muhammad Ali said on Friday that he was retiring to devote full time to his religion.

5. After winning a controversial decision over Ken Norton last week, Muhammad Ali said Friday that he is retiring and will devote full time to his religion.

The sturctural similarity of these sentences should not be misinterpreted; I have cited them merely to emphasize how much variation is possible even when the same basic patterns are being used. Overall, the students used a wide variety of syntactic patterns, as reflected in the following:

6. Muhammad Ali, who last week won a controversial decision over Ken Norton, said that he was retiring to devote full time to his religion.

7. Muhammad Ali wants to devote full time to his religion, so, after winning a controversial decision over Ken Norton, he announced on Friday he was retiring.

The point was not lost on most students that all this individuality of response came about from only three short input sentences. I then could ask them to try to imagine the possibilities there would be for unique utterances, hence creativity, in actual communication contexts where each speaker or writer is developing his own ideas in response to all the differing situations he must deal with.

On the other hand, if as many composition teachers lament, students tend not to make use of a wide range of sentence patterns when they write essays, then the results reported here represent yet another strong argument for using sentence combining drills in the early stages of teaching composition. Since the drills remove the pressure to generate ideas, they permit students to make full use of their internalized knowledge of linguistic structure. But in order for the drills to tap fully the student's creativity, I feel they should be assigned with no instructions or clues as to how they should be combined. This procedure departs from that used by Mellon (1969) and O'Hare (1973) in their pioneering research on the value of sentence combining. To my mind, though, the purpose of the sentence-combining exercise should be to let the student discover for himself the creative potential inherent in his linguistic competence.

Also, in exercises such as these, where there are no instructions and no

limitations, the students quickly begin to see the futility of trying to decide that one combination is better than another in any absolute sense. With every version different, the students come to see that numerous variables, but especially their own sense of naturalness, smoothness, and style, come to bear on that decision. And this is an important insight because in the really important writing situations--the non-academic ones-the students will not have a teacher to rely on for evaluation. They will have to respect their own judgment and have the confidence to rely on it.

Finally, let me say that I don't mean to imply that many students do not have serious writing difficulties. But I do think that exercises such as these can instill a measure of linguistic self-respect early in a course by emphasizing to the students that what they know about language far exceeds what they yet have to learn.

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